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ABSTRACT

The use of religious tracts in teaching a course in persuasive communication is described in this paper. Excerpts from a number of tracts are presented to show how religious tracts can be used in teaching about (1) persuasive messages that appeal to fear, (2) the question of ethics in persuasion, (3) appeals to concerns about physiological well-being and safety, (4) appeals to sexual interests, (5) the loading of persuasive language with emotional connotations, and (6) the way persuasive communications attempt to gain reader attention. The paper concludes by suggesting ways teachers can use religious tracts in class without appearing to persecute religion. (GT)

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Use of Religious Tracts in the Teaching of an Introductory Course in Persuasive Communication

Howard Dorgan

One afternoon a couple of years ago I came home from work and found my wife going through a sizeable stack of colorful pamplets and muttering something about the evils of junk mail. What the postman had brought us that day was a large envelope stuffed with religious tracts, and my wife was about to throw the entire assortment into a wastebasket when I rescued them, thinking I might find a use for this material someday in one of my classes.

The envelope ended up in my office desk and remained there for several weeks. Then one day I was about to meet my persuasion class and was hurriedly looking through my files for something that would illustrate a point I wanted to make about the use of extreme fear appeals. I glanced through the religious tracts and found a small pamplet dramatically entitled Sentenced to Die.[1]

The appeal of this tract was simple and direct. It advanced four basic arguments: (1) Everyone is destined to die; (2) there is a literal hell; (3) this literal hell is characterized by literal brimstone, pillars of salt, and deamons; and (4) you, the reader, ultimately will be relegated to that literal hell if you don't renounce the ways of Satan and accept the redemptive grace of Jesus. But what immediately caught my attention was the tract's employment of very strong fear appeals. Printed in bold red or black letters, words relative to the ultimate demise of

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man jumped out at me from almost every page--"DEATH," "HEARSE," "GRAVEYARD," and "HELL."[2] I was told that "die, death, dieth, died" are "mentioned in the Bible over 1,500 times."[3] I was provided with statistics that indicated that at least 122,400 persons die every day.[4] "Your casket," the tract reminded me, "may be in town now. . . . Your grave may be the next one in your graveyard."[5]

But the crux of the tract's argument was found in the narration of an event which the author alleged he had actually witnessed. According to this story, a prominent "sinner" in town was dying. "He was rich--his life was rotten! He was a bootlegger, a thief, and a liar. I doubt," observed the tract's author, "if he had a real true friend in the neighborhood. Nevertheless, the author "felt compelled to witness to him one more time before he died."

> He knew me well--he knew that I drank and lived a miserable life before I was saved. So I went to see him. He was little more than skin and bones--not much more than a skeleton lying there on the bed breathing. I tried to be kind, loving, and compassionate as I talked with the dying man--BUT TO NO AVAIL. While I was witnessing to him, he called for water. The attendant gave him water with a quill, for the man was too weak to raise his hand and take the glass. He took two or three small swallows of water as the attendant held the glass and quill for him. His arm was down at his side--he tried to put his hand upon his chest, but he was too weak to lift his arm and hand from the bed. The attendant had to lift his arm and place his hand upon his chest. . . .
>
> THE NEXT NIGHT HE DIED!
>
> Keep in mind, dear friend--when I talked to him, he could not lift his arm from the bed; he could not hold a small quill to receive water; he was so weak he could not keep his eyes open--

BUT

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS LATER, WHEN HE DIED, IT TOOK FOUR BIG, STRONG, ROBUST MEN TO HOLD HIM ON THE BED TO KEEP HIM FROM LITERALLY JUMPING OUT OF BED TO DIE ON THE FLOOR!!!

WHY?

Where did such SUPER STRENGTH come from in his last moments? There is only one answer--

Demons were literally tearing his spirit from his body to drag it off into hell, and even in his weakened condition HE FOUGHT WITH ALL THE MIGHT HE COULD MUSTER TO KEEP THE DEMONS FROM TAKING HIM AWAY TO THE PIT!

WHY DO I SAY THIS?

For at least ten or fifteen minutes he begged the men holding him on the bed to pull him further up in the bed; he cried out over and over--

"MY FEET ARE ON FIRE!"
"MY FEET ARE ON FIRE!"
"Won't you please pull my feet up out of the fire!!!"

HIS DYING WORDS WERE--

"WON'T YOU PLEASE PULL MY FEET UP OUT OF THE FIRE!"

Leave the high-powered painkillers out of dying sinners and let them die in their right mind, and you can write VOLUMES OF HAIR-RAISING TESTIMONIES from the lips of men who die without God and plunge into the fires of HELL!!! It is a TERRIBLE THING TO DIE UNSAVED.[6]

I went into class that day prepared to discuss the issue of strong vs. mild fear appeals, to review the available research findings relative to this question, and to examine some representative persuasive messages that employ various levels of fear. My Sentenced to Die tract was to be only one of these messages. I was also prepared to discuss a State Farm automobile insurance ad against rigid highway signposts, a U. S. department of Transportation - National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

advertisement against drinking and driving, examples of the "Relax, You've Got Master Charge" campaign, and a mild fear appeal ad for a Bulova Accutron. But that hour I never got around to any of these other examples. After hearing the passage that I just presented, the students wanted only to discuss fear appeals in religious persuasion. Almost every student had his or her own example of a high-fear religious appeal. I obviously had struck a vein of high-relevancy instructional material.

In the weeks that followed several of the students in this persuasion class brought me religious tracts that they had picked up in one place or another. The result was that the next time I delivered that lecture I had other examples to introduce for discussion, and more students to bring me religious tracts. Two years later I have a sizeable collection of materials from such groups and individuals as The Children of God; The Way, the Truth, and the Life; Rev. Ike; Gospel Hour, Inc.; World Wide Tract Ministry, Inc.; Star Bible Publications; Faith, Prayer, and Tract League; The Sword of the Lord Foundation; and Rev. Sun Myung Moon.

In these two years I have also explored ways to use this form of mass communication other than in the discussion of fear appeals. Today I frequently use a religious tract or two in my discussions of persuasion ethics, motive appeals, the loaded language of persuasion, and organizational strategy, particularly the attention step. Let me first give some examples, and then I want to suggest some cautions to be taken.

Persuasion and Ethics:

I always preface my course in persuasion with a couple of periods in which I treat the question of ethics. During the first of these periods I quickly review some of the traditional standards by which ethicality has been judged: truth or falsity, the "goodness" or "badness" of the end results of persuasion, the intent of the communicator relative to the method of persuasion, and the intent of the communicator relative to the end result. I then usually ask my students to locate a persuasive message which by one of these standards they are willing to defend as being ethical and one which they are prepared to attack as being unethical. To help them see what I mean I give some examples of persuasive messages and ask the class to discuss them at that moment.

One such message I extract from a little magazine entitled Action,[7] a publication distributed by Rev. Dr. Frederick Eikerenkoetter, better known as Rev. Ike. Mailed six times a year[8] to participants, and potential participants, in Rev. Ike's "Blessing Plan," this magazine seeks to persuade the reader that a positive attitude toward money, linked with a willingness to give generously to Rev. Ike's ministry, fosters a mystical economic environment in which all good things--particularly money--flow bounteously to those who give and believe. The "Blessing Plan" is an arrangement by which one agrees to contribute a certain amount of money and receives in return a

prayer cloth, meditations on positive thinking and the innate goodness of money, and multiple reinforcements for a dream of financial security. The participant is urged to avoid being "a hypocrite about money." "Admit openly and inwardly that you like money," declares Rev. Ike.

> Say, "I like money. I want money. I need money. I love money in its right place. Money is not evil. Money is good in its right place. I now establish a good relationship with money in my mind. I have a good spiritual feeling about money. I expect money to come to me in new ways - unexpected ways - right ways. I don't have to do anything wrong to get money. In my mind, I see myself having money for every necessary purpose . . . money to do all the good things I want to do . . . money to do greater things than ever before. Thank you, Father."[9]

The reader of Action is also supplied with numerous testimonials from satisfied Blessing Plan participants:

> Here is a picture of me and our new Linccln. God blessed me and Mama with it after we came to Macon, Georgia, to be in your meeting.[10]

> After I started working with Rev. Ike's blessing plan . . . so much money started coming in, until I had to hide it and bury it in jars and in the washpot. . . . Finally, my wife said, "You better dig up that money and put it in the bank, before someone kills us for it."[11]

> God blessed me with three cars, three bank accounts and a job in one of the banks where I have an account. I have learned that everything Rev. Ike teaches is true.[12]

> Please pray for me to get the over three thousand dollars insurance settlement that is due me. . . . Excuse me, Rev. Ike, the phone is ringing. . . . It is a woman telling me to come pick up the check! Just went down and picked up my check. . . . I am sending you some of the money![13]

Using the standards for judging ethics that I previously mentioned I ask my students to evaluate the ethics of Rev. Ike's persuasive message. The discussions that follow are usually very lively.

Motive Appeals:

I believe that within these tracts one can find examples of appeals to all the basic human drives included in Maslow's hierarchy of prepotent needs. But the appeals most frequently used are the two named by Maslow as being the most basic--physiological well-being and safety. The messages constantly remind the reader of the alleged perils faced by mankind--pain, anguish, death, and eternal damnation. As in Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," man is depicted as being vulnerable, defenseless, unshielded and unsheltered, and ultimately exposed to all the horrors of earth and hell. Outside of "salvation" and the "grace of God" man can only make futile efforts at obtaining security. As one tract expresses it:

> He wore his rubbers when it rained. He brushed his teeth twice a day with a nationally advertised toothpaste. The doctors examined him twice a year. He slept with the windows open. He stuck to a diet with plenty of fresh vegetables. He relinquished his tonsils and traded in several worn-out glands. He golfed--but never more than 18 holes at a time. He got at least eight hours' sleep every night. He never smoked, drank or lost his temper. He did his "daily dozen" daily. He was all set to live to be a hundred. The funeral will be held Wednesday. He's survived by eight specialists, three health institutions, two gymnasiums and numerous manufacturers of health foods and antiseptics. His one mistake--He forgot God, lived as if this world was all, and is now with those who say, "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." Jeremiah 8:20[14]

Sex Appeals:

One can even find rather raw sex appeals employed in a very few of these tracts. Here the many tracts written by Moses David of the Children of God may serve as examples. Pamplets such as

Revolutionary Sex, Mountain Maid, Revolutionary Woman, The Art of Oh, and Come On Ma! - Burn Your Bra! would by the standards of many people have to be labeled as pornography.[15] These tracts preach a heavily socialistic Christianity, mixed with a highly liberated sex life. "We have a sexy God and a sexy religion with a very sexy leader with an extremely sexy young following!" declares David. "So if you don't like sex you'd better get out while you can still save your bra!"[16]

Illustrated with rather vivid drawings of bountifully endowed young women, these tracts suggest that sex is natural, good, and godly and therefore ought to be unrestricted by "prudish conventionality" and "hypocritical traditions."[17] "If you think there's something wrong with sex and you should be ashamed of your body," argues David, "then there's something wrong with God."[18] In language that is lusty--if not also leud--this prophet of sexual license charges that "if you are going to be offended at being stripped bare before God and ravished wildly by His Spirit, how in God's Earth are you going to stand it when He exposes your naked spirit . . . ?"[19] "Salvation," he argues, "sets us free from the curse of clothing and the shame of nakedness! We're as free as Adam and Eve in the Garden before they ever sinned! If you're not, you're not fully saved!"[20]

But this doctrine of liberated sex, as expressed by Moses David, is atypical within the overall body of this tract literature. The view expressed in a small pamplet entitled Eve is Again Listening to the Voice of the Serpent[21] is far

more typical. "Satan has succeeded in commercializing his plot to corrupt women and ruin the race on every side," asserts this tract.

> Semi-naked women are exploited to draw trade. Every line of business has commercialized the nudity of women in their advertising. . . . Today few public ceremonies or festivals are sponsored unless bevies of almost nude women in bathing suits are thrust into the vulgar foreground. Even our little girls are turned into the streets almost naked. These things are undermining the very foundation of our modern civilization.[22]

The Loaded Language of Persuasion:

A close examination of some of the precise language of the last two tracts could lead into a discussion of another usage that I make of these materials. The language of religious tracts is usually rich and vivid and is almost always loaded with emotional connotations. When I discuss style in persuasion or--one of my favorite topics--"language as argument," I often ask my class to do an analysis of the language of some persuasive message. Usually these tracts constitute excellent material for such analysis. Consider, as examples, the following sentences taken alternately from Eve is Again Listening to the Voice of the Serpent and from Come on Ma! - Burn Your Bra!:

> In their flaunted brazenness, boldness and nakedness, they are carrying the race down to hell.
> [Eve is Again Listening][23]

> No wonder Jesus was more readily received by the whores of his day than by the proud self-righteous system women of this world.
> [Come on Ma][24]

> The devil has tacked the badge of harlotry on the women of this nation.
> [Eve is Again Listening][25]

May God deliver us from such phoney hypocrisy!

[Come on Ma]7[26]

Vile pictures that a few years ago were only fit for the brothel and beer parlor are now flaunted on billboards.

[Eve is Again Listening]7[27]

May God damn every self-righteous sex-condemning truth-hiding hypocrite who would hide the truths and beauties of God's creation from his holy pure-minded children!

[Come on Ma]7[28]

Phrases such as "flaunted brazenness," "self-righteous system women," "the badge of harlotry," "phoney hypocrisy," "vile pictures . . . flaunted," and "holy pure-minded children" wield powerful punches primarily because of the emotional loadings that color their imagery. Students can readily understand this principle when you ask them to substitute bland, literal, non-pejorative language for words judged to be emotionally loaded. What they soon discover is that there are no real substitutes for "flaunted brazenness" or "self-righteous system women" or "phoney hypocrisy." The language is the argument. Take it away and you render a thesis impotent by stripping it of supporting values, attitudes, and emotional prejudgments.

Gaining Attention:

When I discuss "Strategies of Organization in Persuasion" I briefly examine the basis sequential arrangements proposed by Hollingworth, Monroe, Ross, Hovland, Aristotle, and others.[29] In most of these arrangements the first step is the sequence is labeled the attention step. This suggests a general agreement with the idea that before you can begin to persuade someone you must first gain his attention.

With this basic principle in mind, I usually devote about twenty to thirty minutes of one of my lectures to a discussion of techniques--good and bad--of gaining attention. In this discussion I stress the idea that some techniques can become too gimmicky and thus result in what Thomas Scheidel calls the "boomerang effect."[30] Here my collection of religious tracts can again provide materials for analysis.

One of my favorites for this purpose is a tract that looks exactly like a five dollar bill that has been folded twice. It is designed to be left in some public place where an unwary passerby will pick it up, thinking that he has stumbled upon a lucrative find. However, when the individual starts to unfold his "five dollars" he discovers on the inside of the first fold the following message: "Disappointed? Satan also deceives, but Jesus saves!" Then on the inside of the second fold he finds a series of Bible verses and a fairly traditional religious tract message.[31]

The student who brought me this particular tract reported that the boomerang effect had certainly been at work on her when she discovered this gimicky message. She had spent a long morning at the one busy intersection in Boone, North Carolina, sticking a bucket inside windows of cars stopped for the light, collecting for a charatable cause. At the end of that morning she discovered the tract among the change and bills that had been donated and felt cheated.

A second example of a tract falling into this category of usage is one which I would really like to see employed on someone.

This little message is designed to be given to somebody who is riding in the religious zealot's car--perhaps some unsuspecting and witless hitchhiker. So imagine, if you will, a smiling hitchhiker sliding into the front seat of a car and being handed, by the driver, a little tract that reads as follows:

What To Do In Case I Vanish

Don't Panic.

1. This is part of a planned operation.
2. Take hold of the steering wheel.
3. Maintain control of the car.
4. Quickly shift to driver position.
5. Don't stop. Proceed to you destination.
6. At the destination, call the church listed below and advise anyone answering of my sudden exodus.

A Big Joke?

I should say not. The Lord has promised a day when He would remove His people in the twinkling of an eye! Signs indicate that day could be at hand. I don't think it fair to let you ride with me and not know. There is a risk.[32]

Some Cautions:

As I indicated earlier, I would like to close this essay by interjecting some words of caution. Religion is, of course, one of the most sensitive of topics. It becomes especially so when one subjects the rhetorical methods of any particular religious group to close scrutiny. These tracts do represent a particular religious mind, usually a very fundamentalist one, and in today's university classroom one is apt to find at least one or two very fundamentalist students.

Now I have never been one who enjoys insulting, offending, or hurting anyone because of his religious beliefs. At the same time,

however, I have always felt that the greatest wrong that can be done religious practices is to never mention them in any academic setting. Like other aspects of man's experience, his religious involvements should be open to critical analysis. We all know, however, that critical analysis can be scathing, iconoclastic, and offensive, and it can be sensitive, constructive, and humane. I would prefer, of course, to see it be the latter. Therefore, I try to avoid assuming (1) an agressive stance in my presentation and discussion of these materials, and (2) the appearance of only "picking on" religion.

The approach that works best for me is to first introduce the key principles, next to present a persuasive message or two for analysis, and then to stand back and let the students make the analytical application of principle to message. Student criticisms of these tracts have always been sufficiently severe. In fact, on occasion I have found myself having to tone down the criticisms a little when I saw a sensitive minority being severely bludgeoned.

I try to avoid that problem of appearing to persecute religion by making sure that the messages that are considered in class come from a wide range of sources. When I lead a class in a discussion of ethics in persuasion, for example, I do so with the aid of three very different persuasive messages. The first is the Rev. Ike material that I discussed earlier. The second is a Senator Jesse Helms political advertisement which was used in 1972 to defeat Helm's opponent for the Senate, Nick Galifianakis. And the third is a packet of promotional materials sent out by an

Atlanta based vanity press which in 1973 tried to publish a Who's Who in North Carolina by sending a nomination letter, a biographical data sheet, and an order form to everyone in the state who possessed an American Express credit card.

Students seem to find my collection of religious tracts to be interesting, relevant, and definitely applicable to our discussions of persuasive theory and practice. So I recommend this particular form of communication to you for your classroom discussions. The imaginative teacher could, no doubt, find even greater use of these materials.

FOOTNOTES

[1]*Sentenced to Die*, The Gospel Hour, Inc., Oliver B. Greene, Director (Greenville, South Carolina).

[2]*Sentenced to Die*, pp. 6, 7, 9, 11, 15, and 17.

[3]*Sentenced to Die*, p. 12.

[4]*Sentenced to Die*, p. 12.

[5]*Sentenced to Die*, pp. 12-13.

[6]*Sentenced to Die*, pp. 22-25.

[7]*Action Magazine* is independently published by Rev. Ike, G.P.O. Box 50, New York, N. Y. 10001.

[8]Over six million copies circulated every two months in 1971.

[9]*Action Magazine*, 21 (October-November, 1971), 10.

[10]*Action Magazine*, 21 (October-November, 1971), 3.

[11]*Action Magazine*, 21 (October-November, 1971), 4.

[12]*Action Magazine*, 21 (October-November, 1971), 9.

[13]*Action Magazine*, 21 (October-November, 1971), 4.

[14]*His One Mistake* (Faith, Prayer, and Tract League: Grand Rapids, Michigan), 1-4.

[15]All of these tracts can be ordered from either of the two United States offices of the Children of God: Box 520522, Biscayne Annex, Miami, Florida 33152; or Box 50126 T. A., Atlanta, Georgia 30302. Instructions for ordering also include the following statement: "Please enclose a donation to cover the costs of printing and postage."

[16]*Come on Ma! - Burn Your Bra!*, p. 2.

[17]*Come on Ma! - Burn Your Bra!*, p. 1.

[18]*Come on Ma! - Burn Your Bra!*, p. 2.

[19]*Come on Ma! - Burn Your Bra!*, p. 1.

[20]*Come on Ma! - Burn Your Bra!*, pp. 2-3.

[21]Eve is Again Listening to the Voice of the Serpent (Osterhus Publishing House: Minneapolis, Minnesota).

[22]Eve is Again Listening, p. 3.

[23]Eve is Again Listening, p. 2.

[24]Come on Ma!, p. 2.

[25]Eve is Again Listening, p. 4.

[26]Come on Ma!, p. 2.

[27]Eve is Again Listening, p. 3.

[28]Come on Ma!, p. 3.

[29]For a brief examination of these various sequential arrangements see Raymond S. Ross, Persuasion: Communication and Interpersonal Relations (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 176-185.

[30]Thomas M. Scheidel, Speech Communication and Human Interaction (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1976), 322-323.

[31]I do not know how to tell you to obtain this tract. There is not a publisher's name anywhere on it. In fact, I wonder if the reason for this omission in not that such printing practices violate federal laws relative to counterfeiting.

[32]C. S. Lovett, What to Do in Case I Vanish (Baldwin, California: Personal Christianity), 1-2.